THE AMERICAN FIFTH AIR FORCE SERVICE BASE AND THE STOCKROUTE AIRSTRIP

by Rod Cardell

Dr Rod Cardell grew up in Townsville when his family lived close to the Mount Louisa military airstrip and he wrote the book Wings Around Us about his experiences.

As a nine year old lad in 1941, I lived with my mother and sister in an old house beside Dalrymple stock route in the scrubby outskirts of Townsville. We could sit on our front verandah and watch the cattle grazing and rarely did one even see a car go by. It therefore came as a delightful surprise for me one morning to see two aeroplanes taxiing down our side road and then park outside my front fence.

They had just taxied one and a half miles from Garbutt aerodrome and belonged to RAAF 24 Squadron, its surviving two Wirraways which had been outclassed and decimated by the Japanese Zeroes at Rabaul. It was 24 January 1942 I was about to begin the most exciting period of my life. For two years I would abandon school and observe the development of an aircraft service base which would engulf my home and become the largest such base outside the United States and Great Britain and have a major impact on the war effort of the South-west Pacific.

Soon men arrived with trucks and graders and in days converted that unspoilt cattle trail into an airstrip. Now I could sit on my front verandah and watch aircraft taking-off and landing just 150 yards in front of me. A couple of tent erected under a clump of gum trees 75 yards behind my home became headquarters of 24 Squadron. Here they would park their aircraft and in the late afternoon after the men had gone I would steal across to their headquarters to admire and caress their aircraft. What a thrill for a nine year old lad.

Around midday on 28 March I sat with my folk in the bed of a nearby creek craning to glimpse the high-flying Japanese reconnaissance plane. Later that afternoon I watched a squadron of strange new American bombers fly low and fast overhead. A few minutes later these B26 Martin Marauders of the American 22nd Bomb Group sped down our side road and parked along our front fence line. One called Dixie parked so close that when her engines were re-started, the slipstream blew over an old blue wardrobe on our front verandah.

By dusk I could contain my curiosity no longer, so with a little courage and great bravado, I made my way to Dixie. The Americans were wonderful and showed me through their top secret bomber and gave me souvenirs — a torch, a hand held game of skill and their special insignia, the blue 'Ducemus'.

When they left on bombing missions, I leaned on our side fence to farewell them, and wait there to welcome them home. Dixie's crew would occasionally come across to sit on our verandah and between cups of tea tell us of the excitement of their raids. Dixie was lost on her thirteenth mission but the young captain made a miraculous crash-landing in a dried-up river bed in the jungles of New Guinea. All survived and aided by friendly natives and Australian Coast Watchers, trudged back to civilisation after 28 arduous days and long, lonely nights.

When 24 Squadron moved out in late June, they were replaced by 33rd Transport Squadron of the RAAF, which commandeered the abandoned farm house 100 yards or so to the side of us. They were a great bunch of chaps and I spent a great deal of time at their base. They allowed me to climb into their Avro Anson and Oxford aircraft as I desired, and even put me to small practical tasks. On two wonderful occasions they took me aloft in their aircraft.

Three times in July 1942 the Japanese intruded from the skies. The first time, Townsville was caught unawares as two giant four-engined flying-boats leisurely flew around for half an hour while late-nighters enjoyed themselves in the brightly lit streets below. A couple of suspicious searchlights probed the moonlight sky and caught the raiders in their beams. An American light anti-aircraft battery opened fire to no avail. A stick of bombs were dropped harmlessly into the bay before they returned to their base in Rabaul. Most of Townsville slept on.

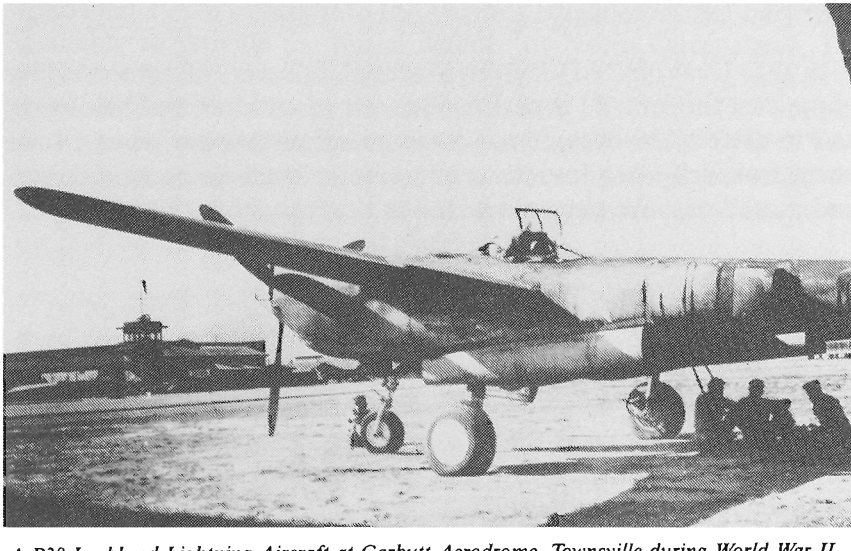
On the second occasion, again around midnight, I sat in the creek-bed and watched in fear and excitement as another four-engines intruder was brightly illuminated in the searchlight beams and 72 rounds of anti-aircraft shells exploded spectacularly in the sky without troubling them.

The last raid was spectacular to all on the ground. Most people would have shivered in the cold night air as air-raid shelters were scorned and people positioned themselves for another gala performance. The anti-aircraft guns were ordered silent and two American F39 Bell Airacobras stalked from the darkness as the lone Japanese flying-boat was illuminated like a silver cross in the sky. Tracers could be seen passing like slow motion between the duelling aircraft. Eventually only the fighter continued as the flying-boat slowly faded out of range. It was a combination of excitement by the pilots and their inadequate fighter planes that denied them any success.

In October 1942 the 4th Air Depot Group of the U.S. Air Force under the command of the fiery Colonel Bertrandias arrived to establish their mighty aircraft base. They could assemble aeroplanes, modify aircraft for the changing patterns of war and maintain and repair fighters and bombers after the rigors of combat. A multitude of igloos and other buildings were erected seemingly overnight, and more completely engulfed us within this base. We were ordered to vacate our home, but we refused. This resulted in protracted confrontation but eventually we were issued with passes and allowed to remain. What marvellous luck. It also demonstrated considerable tolerance by the military hierarchy as under regulations 53, 54 and 55 of the National Security Regulations they could compulsorily acquire property. Under this process called 'hiring', 177 private buildings, mostly homes, were commandeered in the 1942 in the Townsville area. One whole street, Chapman Street, was evacuated from the peaceful suburb of Mysterton, yet we were permitted to remain in such a sensitive area.

The command of the 4th ADG passed to Colonel Richard J. Kirkpatrick, who, shortly after their arrival, saw me standing on the side of the airstrip as a young American Captain was preparing for a flight. He told his junior officer to take me for a flight which he did. It was not only for this gesture that I remember him as one of my heroes of the war.

In December 1942 33rd Squadron deployed north to New Guinea and their small base was taken over by the larger RAAF 36th Squadron



A P38 Lockheed Lightning Aircraft at Garbutt Aerodrome, Townsville during World War II — John Oxley Library

for the next 18 months. All through the night engineers worked to service these aircraft which then flew unescorted and unarmed on dangerous missions of logistics to New Guinea.

Throughout 1943 the base expanded. The 12th and 15th Air Depot Groups arrived to add their numbers and expertise to the 4th ADG, operating this outstanding depot of the South-West Pacific. The number of highly skilled American technicians swelled to around five thousand. Hundreds of aircraft lined both sides of the road leading to Garbutt aerodrome. An aircraft taxiway with parking bays was built from one end of the airstrip to the other, encircling my home. Two more igloos were constructed in our back paddock. Night and day the activity never ceased. There was always a cacophony of noise floating across from the engine 'running-in' concrete bunkers the other side of the airstrip.

I enjoyed the company of many wonderful servicemen, both Australian and American. We went horse riding, swimming and shooting together. In the late afternoons I liked to wander among the aeroplanes and would often be invited to climb on board for a look. I enjoyed sitting at the controls of their superb aircraft. I suppose I was well known, because I rarely carried my pass and was never challenged. At night my friends would invite me to their canteen or to their movies and once to a live show. Twice more I went flying with the Americans, one a fantastic low level buzz around the harbour and beaches of Townsville.

In 1944 I was obliged to return to school, but every afternoon riding home past the sentry I experienced an air of comfort and belonging as I re-entered the base. It was a sad occasion that day when I rode home from school to find the sentry empty. The base had packed up and moved out. We alone remained in the centre of a 'Ghost Town'.